

## Letter on double-blind refereeing published in *Physics World*, July 2014

### Double-blind Bind

Penny Gowland has got it wrong on double-blind refereeing. The issue is not "what review process is best?" but "how do we make the review process work better?" There is no optimal or ideal review process, just as there is no optimal election system: "objective" evaluation is a chimera that is unobtainable in principle. People have to evaluate and people are not objects! Gowland says that it is "inevitable" that referees "bring their personal prejudices to bear". I strongly deny this. My experience is that dispassionate reviews are normal. Everyone knows that reviews are not "objective" since multiple reviewers always say different things. But all reviewers know very well that they are supposed to criticise on the basis of the text they have, and not on their prior opinion of the authors. I have personally never made, nor seen, an ad hominem review.

Why is this? It is because editors will discount ad hominem reviews, if necessary seeking another reviewer. The authors can always complain to the editor that the reviewer is not being fair. The essential point to realise, and I am continuously emphasising this to my young colleagues, is that reviewers are not God. They are not always right, and then you argue your point with (or through) the editor. Reviewers, like all of us, get things wrong: but authors should ask, was that my fault? could my text have been clearer?

I think reviewing is systematically misunderstood. The purpose of the review is not to ask, "is this thesis correct?" but, "is it coherent?" Critics of the status quo should remember that reviewers are always operating under time pressure (usually extreme). They simply do the best they can in the time available. Is the result perfect? Could the result ever possibly be perfect? I find it helpful to know who has written the paper since it speeds up the evaluation. You already know where they are coming from and what background (and equipment) they have; you know what they ought to know. As a simple example, you know (for instance) how to handle bad English: if it is an American group then you know the student has written the paper without proper supervision but if it is Chinese you are more understanding. This is legitimate, since the referee is supposed to look under the text, to read between the lines.

It is people who know things, not stones; therefore knowledge is necessarily subjective. Scientific papers are consequently one (very disciplined) form of persuasion. The review process forces the authors to persuade (at least) the referees that they have advanced knowledge. Reviews should be: not "objective" (impossible!) but "dispassionate". And the criteria for reviewers should be: is this coherent? am I persuaded of its value?

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